



THE MEANING, NATURE, GOAL AND SUBJECT MATTER OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

The aftermath of Vatican II brought about significant developments in the Church's theological enterprise, rich in promise and challenges. It brought about the shifts in both its understanding and approach. Human beings have always tried to decipher the puzzling fragments of life. This fact is not just a matter of theologians or priests or pastors, it is a matter of performing a critical theological reflection on the whole pastoral praxis of the Church. Very often pastoral theology is equated by historical practice and is overly influenced by psychological theory and practice rather than drawn from the lived experience of the Church. Competent pastors have always recognised a strong point between what Christian faith confesses about God, that is redemption through Jesus Christ, and the life of sanctification, and the care of God's people.

For decades, pastoral theology has been regaining its theological roots at the level of deep foundational assumptions and practice. Recently, pastoral theology has recognised the importance of reflecting on the Church as she is built up daily by the power of the Holy Spirit in history as a living sign and instrument of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Yet, pastoral theology is that branch of theology that cannot be neglected because of its fundamental importance and relevance to both the Church and society. It bridges the relationship between the Church and society. It does this by providing care for the individual through personal experiences and makes meaningful contributions to the development of human beings, not neglecting their salvation and temporal good. It takes into considerations, the human existential situations and the quest for the divine, trying to bring together cognate and theological resources to deepen the understanding and shape the mission of the Church in order to respond to the healing and care of God's people.

This paper therefore, aims at describing a branch of theology that has seemed forgotten and taken for granted for decades. In this paper, we will be discussing the general notion of pastoral theology, in a way that will enable us to understand what pastoral theology is in definition, its sources, the subject matter of pastoral theology, the importance and goal of pastoral theology.

1. WHAT IS PASTORAL THEOLOGY?

The term pastoral is derived from the Latin word ‘Pastor’, meaning, shepherd, and it thus suggests the work of a shepherd in relation to the care giving to his sheep. Pastoral theology is the science of the care of souls. It begins with situations of human beings particularly that of care of souls and tries to bring together cognate and theological resources to deepen the understanding and shape our mission to care in order to respond and attend to the healing and care of Gods people. Pastoral theology thus, addresses the difficulties of individuals, families and larger societal issues that contribute to the Christian growth in faith and leads to salvation. It therefore begins and ends in the gracious gift of mutual love and care of souls to a redemptive approach of human desire for God. As a result, pastoral theology is not easily defined, but rather described and this allows for a fluid and open approach to a theology that has roots in the experiences contained within and outside of its distinct boundaries.

A classical description of Pastoral Theology by Seward Hiltner, shows that pastoral theology is that branch or field of theological knowledge and inquiry, which brings the shepherding perspective to bear upon all the operations and functions of the Church and the minister and then draws conclusions of a theological order from reflection on these observations. This however, describes pastoral theology as an operation-centred or function- centred theology. This then implies that it attends to the theological questions raised by the practice of care in response to the need of the soul, and it brings theological and as well similar contemporary knowledge into this question in order to care in response to the situation and needs of God’s people. This situation and needs are the concrete situation of Christians living as the body of Christ.

Some people limit the understanding of the nature and scope of pastoral theology. For some, pastoral theology is simply a technique of doing the ministry. While, for others the techniques had to do more with manners than with the practice of care, that is, proper dress and appropriate behaviour rather than the care or cure for the parishioner. In today’s understanding, however, pastoral theology has taken a wider scope. Some theologians, like Karl Rahner, argue that pastoral theology is not purely and simply a doctrine limited to the priestly office but extends to everything,

which the Church as the body of Christ has to do.

We may thus describe it as that branch of theology, which is concerned with the basic principles, theories, and practices of the caring and counselling of ministry. It includes a study of the methods of care and healing as well as moral and religious life and development, personality theory, interpersonal and family relationships, and specific problems, which may include among others, the physical, psychological, moral, spiritual problems of a person.

In its complex identity and debated meaning, the field of pastoral theology has its nature rooted in the theology of shepherding. From the Shepherd stems the priestly pastoral ministry established by Christ. The shepherds who are entrusted with the pastoral care of His flock (John 21: 15), Christ has made the ministers and dispensers of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1) to continue to care for and form the personal character of maturation in truth. Therefore, pastoral theology is the branch of theology, which shows pastoral responsibilities for others, in families, at work, in church, in school, etc. In other words, we may say that pastoral theology is about theological reflections that guide pastoral care. It is about individual and corporate well-being. Although the metaphor of pastor as shepherd may be used in relationship to all functions of the Church, the particular aspect of caring for congregational bodies is central to this application and understanding of pastoral theology.

Andrew Purves, in examining the classical tradition in pastoral theology and in his concern on the spirituality of the pastor and the true nature of pastoral theology understood it as the lived action through the Church and in the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. This nature is of the ministering reality of God in Christ for salvation. For him, pastoral theology is lived out of doctrine at the point of connection between the Gospel and the lives of God's people. In the mind of Parves, he tries to develop a trajectory of moulding and shaping the pastoral mind and practices in a profound and enduring manner, but his concern was rather not with appropriate Christian response to pastoral needs as they arose, rather, it is with the nature and responsibility of the pastoral and priestly office itself. In this case, he is more fundamental, theological and spiritual in his approach.

Again, from the perspective of care, Anthony Umoren, defines pastoral theology as a

practical theological discipline, which focuses on the ministry or care of souls. This means that pastoral theology systematically puts into practical effect, knowledge about God gained from the scriptures and other theological disciplines. In other words, the pastoral theologian directs theology towards the concrete task of caring or ministering to people as a leader in the Christian assembly, with the ultimate end of saving souls. It is not just about knowledge per se, but the knowledge, which leads to life. In this regard, Robert L. Kinast, describes pastoral theology as that branch of theology, which deals with the office and functions of the pastor. Hence, it is theology because it treats of the consequences of God's self-disclosure in history. It is also pastoral because it deals with those consequences as they pertain to the roles, tasks, duties and works of the pastor.

More than anything else, pastoral theology is characterized by the inseparability of doctrine and pastoral action as expressed by Joseph Ratzinger in his commentary on Vatican II: *"this Council is pastoral in its fusion of truth and love, doctrine and pastoral solicitude; it wished to reach beyond the dichotomy between pragmatism and doctrinalism, back to the biblical unity in which practice and doctrine are one, a unity grounded in Christ."*

In Ratzinger's understanding, pastoral theology is therefore, the continued reflection of the Church on the unchanging truth of doctrine in view of its being lived in faith, hope, and charity, and in view of giving direction to all of the pastoral activity of the Church. In addition, it is also a reflection on the truth of the gospel in order to uncover its significance for the human person and build up the Church. In other words, it is simply a reflection on concrete human experience clearly aiming at formulating practical means of dealing with problems in the context of ministry. Its concern is not so much with developing meanings and principles but with the normative applications and how theology connects with each person's concrete experience.

By its very nature and also because every generation needs to appropriate the truth and Church's faith for itself, pastoral theology cannot be limited simply to repeat the formulas of the past. It must discover the meaning and relevance of these formulas, both in the past and for the present day in which the Church lives. Therefore, pastoral theology raises the theological issues of meaning and truth in relation to the living out of the life of faith. It brings together theory and practice, it relates to pastoral skills and ministry training, but it is also concerned for every aspect of social policy and cultural experience of the individual.

2. SOURCES OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Like other branches of theology, pastoral theology has its roots in the Holy Scripture and Tradition of the Church, as its first sources, in so far as they portray the ideal priest, the teacher and the pastor, and as well hand down to us his ideas for the care of souls of the Christian faithful.

Traditionally, the decrees of general councils, the decrees of Roman Congregations and the Pontifical Constitutions are of the highest point. At local levels, the decrees of regional councils and synods as well as pastoral letters of the local ordinaries served as the sources of pastoral theology. Decrees of various provincial councils and diocesan synods together with pastoral letters of archbishops and bishops are also among the sources whence pastoral theology draws. However, the various sources of dogmatic and moral theology, ecumenism, and liturgy and of canon law have become the authoritative sources of pastoral theology, as far as they bear either directly or indirectly upon the care of souls.

Pastoral theology reached its climax in the Second Vatican Council and assumed a new importance, with the specific purpose of renewing the Church. Thus, the council recognised a new dynamic missionary challenge in the Church and immediately sought openly and constructively to engage the modern world. Hence, pastoral theology becomes the Church's insightful renewal and self-fulfilling instrument in the contemporary changing situations of our society.

3. THE SUBJECT MATTER OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY

One issue around which the recent discussions on pastoral theology has fractured is the identification of the subject matter, what praxis does it deal with? In as much as pastoral theology raises theological issues of meaning and truth in relation to the living out of the life of Christian faith. It takes with complete seriousness every struggle we engage in to understand ourselves, our culture and the functioning of our society.

3.1 The Life of the Church itself

Because the Church finds the needs for her contemporary fulfilment in her pastoral ministry,

the call for a broader understanding of the subject matter of pastoral theology strikes an echoing chord. For example, it finds an expression in the Church's hand book of pastoral ministry, which then in process, defines its subject as the nature and task of the whole Church. Heinz Schuster thus defines it as the ministry in quest for understanding and fostering, in a manner that is inclusive of all members of the Church, not simply the clergy. Although it is a discipline in clerical education, the subject matter of pastoral theology is the life and activity of the Church as it exists as a whole in the present.

3.2 The Activities of the Church

The activities of the Church are drawn by the particular situation at any given time. Pastoral theology thus deals with the contemporary situation of the Church, reminding it of its ever-new task of announcing the gospel for the human society as it is in the present. It is therefore, obviously rooted within the actual situations of Christian faith.

3.3 The Life of the Church in the World

A third proposed identification of the subject matter of pastoral theology is slender, but significant. It as well deals with the Church as a whole, but with a singular emphasis on the placement of the Church in the world, and its resulting mission. Consequently, such internal issues as liturgy, takes on a new focus concerning how pastoral ministry is prepared and express to the world. Liturgy is therefore, the source of the life of the Church because it is the ground on which the Church is formed and nourished by the life-giving power of God. It is the framework of the Church to serves as stewardess of the means of Grace. Thus, the Church has no life in the world apart from pasturing the life of God's people.

3.4 Religious/Moral Life in the World

The equation of pastoral theology with moral theology is even stronger here, religious/moral actions in the world. While the Church constitutes a greater part of its subject matter, the moral/religious dimensions of general human culture is significantly important. Some Christians experience dissonance in the practical realities of life, particularly with the leading of their conscience in making moral choices. Pastoral theology therefore, contends these unaddressed

theological issues, which often arise from the particularity of human experience, including the actual practice of ministry. The goal of pastoral theology then is the development of a public account of proper actions in the world.

3.5 Human Spiritual/Existential Experience

Some theologians still argue that pastoral theology should focus less on human actions than on such fundamental human experiences as temptation and the contradictions that call life into question. The aim is to bring our world into communion with the Creator as it grows out of practical and existential experience of the people, and returns to this experience. It is not limited to academic queries but surely covers the personal and spiritual needs of the people by maintaining the hermeneutical balance in theological reflection. The purpose of reflecting upon such experiences is therefore, to help guide the life of the soul.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY

Pastoral theology is inherently a theology concerned with action defined and shaped at all points by the acts of God in Christ given in and as the gospel. As such, the Meaning of pastoral theology is derived from the natural human need for God. The human thirst for God also demands a thirst for a minister who leads to God. Thus, Pastoral theology is a systematic process through which people are led to God. People have different needs and reasons by which they are drawn to God. This significantly proves the need for a pastoral guide who can minister to them, making present or mediating to them the word of God in their concrete life situation. This is the specific task of the practitioner of pastoral theology.

The present state and growth of pastoral theology is a strong and vigorous one. Its range of interests has been widening since it got off to a new start in the years following Vatican II. Its subjects took on a new life and meaning and the response becomes prolific. Its importance is substantial to such demands as sustaining and giving support to the weak, comforting and understanding people in crises. Pastoral theology in the person of the minister also guides and helps people to find solutions to various problems and life's questions, healing and aiding them to find wellness; and reconciling people to restore relationships.

5. THE GOAL OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY

From what we have known about the nature and meaning of pastoral theology, it is possible for us to see its goal or purpose as effective pastoral ministry in both theory and practice. As we know, the ministry of a pastoral theologian is directed towards the salvation of souls. In order to realise this objective, pastoral theology works out the principles of pastoral action, recognising the relevant pastoral ministers, pastoral agents and pastoral activities that would orient the practitioner towards a successful ministry.

Pastoral theology, unlike other branches of theology, is rooted in the existential understanding of the contemporary Christian. Being a theology of the Church's practice rather than that of its doctrine, pastoral theology is set within the context of self-reflection as an existential praxis. It therefore, aims at seeking out the best possible way to be at the service God's people, through its different pastoral actions, whether it is in teaching, preaching, administration, worship, singing, praying, counselling, sacramental life or spiritual life.

Pastoral theology, therefore, trains the pastoral minister to read the signs of times, helps him/her to apply the scriptures and theology to the different and particular life situations. In this way, pastoral theology employs the elements and fruits of social analysis as a method. Therefore, the goal of pastoral theology is the salvation of souls brought about through ministering example of Jesus Christ himself, since Christ is the chief shepherd of the Christian community, and the ultimate model of ministry.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that today we live in an age of rapid development of science and high technological achievements, communication and economic growth, people are still engrossed in the search for the truth and the ultimate meaning of life. In the quest for economic survival and technological development, one would have expected the world demised of suffering and injustice; and a better place to live, but there still exists in our world existential situations that neither science nor technology nor reason can provide solutions. There exist unemployment, slavery, human

trafficking, drug trafficking and abuse, prostitution, child abuse, refugees, devil worshiping, election malpractices, bribery and corruption, name them.

Through an exploration of the multiple facet strands of our society today, we have observed the way in which pastoral theology provides meaning in the midst of difficulties and practical situations in forming a communal identity. The distinctive character of pastoral theology as a discipline is its attempt to understand the ministerial role from the lived experience of people. Therefore, leading people to find meaning and to God is the real goal of pastoral theology. Pastoral theology is not an abstract understanding of God detached from the texture and paradox of life. It is a living and organic theology that shapes and informs our everyday experience.

So far, we have seen that service to the people in a wider society is part of pastoral theology. This service consists principally in being the voice of the voiceless, the poor and the oppressed. Because the social concerns of people do have a hearing before God. Pastoral theology therefore, includes the hopes and aspirations, yearnings and fears of the time; and it is exercised in the context of the socio- political and economic realities of the people. This is because God is interested in human welfare and in the human environment.

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